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AUTHOR	Beattie, Kate
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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides strategies for instructors to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds and to encourage cultural awareness in their classrooms, focusing on the situation in Australian higher education. It discusses the need to avoid stereotyping students, to be aware of differing cultural norms, and to be clear about educational expectations. The booklet suggests ways for instructors to get to know their students and to encourage discussion and comprehension. It also provides suggestions for instructors to encourage specific learning styles. Includes a list of four recommended readings and five resource institutions. (MDM)

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Internationalising Teaching

Kate Beattie

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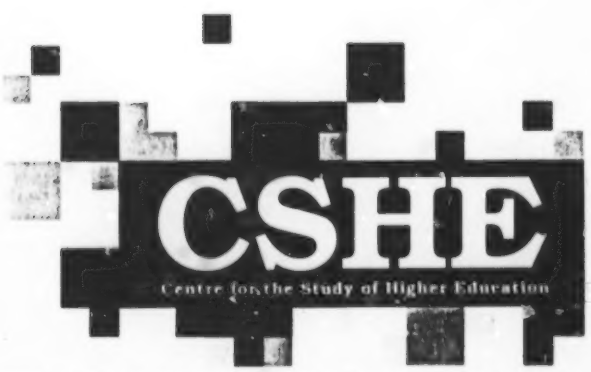

The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3052 AUSTRALIA. Telephone: 03) 344 4605 Facsimile: 03) 344 7576

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Internationalising Teaching

Australian classrooms are made up of students with a great diversity of cultural backgrounds, and the class or group you're teaching is unlikely to be an exception. Many of your students will have had intimate experience of another culture and language, either in their home-life or from living overseas. For some of them, Australia may be a new environment. Other students won't have had the experience of crossing cultures and will know only one language.

As their teacher, your own cultural background is imposed on this diverse cultural mix. There's no doubt you all have much to learn from one another.

However, there may well be problems with such cultural diversity. The classroom is full of stereotypes and prejudices that come from outside the learning situation. As an example of possible stereotypes you may have when you first face a class, do you think you can tell, without asking, which students:

- were born overseas or have lived overseas,
- are able to cook exotic food,
- are able to demonstrate dances of another culture,
- are able to speak another language, or
- will speak with a foreign accent?

Of course, you can't. More importantly from an educational point of view, can you tell which ones haven't been prepared by their previous education to:

- read with a questioning attitude;
- learn with understanding;
- question and argue, experiment, criticise;
- speculate and theorise;
- express themselves clearly (spoken and written);
- write a lab report, essay or critical review in the required style;
- defend a point of view in a class or tutorial; or
- manage their learning without help from you?

If you think that most, if not all, your students will need your help with these activities, you're probably correct. So, how can you encourage learning in a culturally mixed classroom?

Be aware of differing cultural norms:

Your students will have differing cultural norms that determine the way they expect to treat, and be treated by, people in authority, people younger or older than themselves, men or women, people of other races, and so on. All these things, as well as their new relationship with you at the beginning of a course or program of study, are likely to make them nervous, unsettled and perhaps downright uncomfortable. This is particularly true of students new to the Australian education system. Ways of dealing with this are listed below.

Be clear about your aims for learning:

Be clear that one of your major educational aims is to encourage students to move from a reproductive style of learning (comprehending), through an analytical (questioning) approach to a speculative (modifying) learning approach. All students will be somewhere along this continuum, and you probably need to encourage *all* of them to develop their thinking and learning strategies in the required direction. Postgraduate students, in particular, need to be encouraged to develop a critical, speculative approach.

The fact that all students in the class or group need this support is important. Any improvement you make or support you offer in teaching is likely to be beneficial to most, if not all, of your students. What will help a few is likely to help others. And not just within one cultural group; good teaching support is needed by the whole class. Again, ways of offering that support are listed below.

Be aware of differing educational expectations:

Your students may well have different perceptions from you of their roles as learners and of your role as their teacher, depending upon their previous educational experiences. Some of them may be prepared to treat everything you say with deference and honour and not be prepared to argue with you in public, although they may think critically in private. They may treat the written word as an authority not to be challenged. Others, educated in a different culture, may be continually questioning and argumentative, challenging your views and those of other authorities at every opportunity. Still others may be passive learners, and may need prompting into constructive criticism and argument.

To get to know students:

- Avoid stereotyping and labelling of any sort. Your class is made up of individuals.
- Become familiar with students' backgrounds. This will inform your teaching. Have personal contact with students; build this into the program. Show genuine interest in students' work, especially when they are new.
- Have individual interviews with students, especially to give them feedback on their work or to find out about their progress.
- If you're unsure of students' experience in some areas (for example, lab work), have them work in groups with others whose backgrounds you're familiar with until their competence is established.

To encourage discussion:

- Make sure everyone knows how to address each other, including yourself. Make sure people's preferred name and form of address are known; some students may prefer formality, others not.
- If they're likely to be nervous, ask students to work in pairs or small groups before introducing open discussion.

- Give students notice they will be asked to talk in a few minutes; this gives them time to gather their thoughts and to find words, especially if they're using a second language.
- Gently encourage students to argue. They may not be used to it or may find it distasteful.
- Ask questions relevant to the cultures represented in the class or group.

To encourage comprehension:

- You should be clear what you want students to be able to do by the end of a course, and you should tell students about this. Make clear your aims and objectives for the course, for each section, and for each session, and keep referring back to them. Show students, perhaps by using a skeleton outline of the course, where each session fits in.
- Aim to teach key ideas, rather than too much content. Repeat main points.
- Use clear audio/visual aids. Your overhead transparencies should be simple and clear.
- Hand out outlines of lectures.
- If there's a useful textbook or other source material students can fall back on, direct students to it and remind them about it often.
- Prepare a glossary of unusual terms and names. Be aware of, and explain, slang and colloquialisms when you use them.
- Tape lectures, and meetings with postgraduates, so that students can review them.

To encourage the style of learning you're aiming for:

- Point out to students that you and they might be working with different expectations of teaching/learning, and then describe and discuss effective ways of learning. Teach these, not just subject content.

- Model styles of thinking, critical reading and arguing in your lectures and tutorials. Tell students you're doing this, and say why. Look at different styles of argument, rather than just using the essay, the lab report, the review as a matter of course. Explain why they are designed the way they are and what purposes they achieve.
- Assessment is powerful — use it! Whatever you're teaching, look at the assessment; what is it saying students need to learn/do? Are you assessing them, at least in part, on independent learning and analytic and evaluative skills? Make sure students' knowledge is applied, not just acquired. Explain clearly to students what's needed. (Assessment of language skills is discussed below.)
- Give students models of what should be in their answers — this might represent an entirely new way of arguing or style of writing for them. Show them the style and standard of work expected. Point out how textbooks handle arguments in their discipline and show them examples of other students' work, or of theses if they are postgraduates.
- Discuss the need for adequate referencing of others' work. Many students have trouble knowing how to use the ideas and words of others. Teach the method and style you require.
- Comment on outlines or drafts of students' work. This can save them, and yourself, a lot of time and heartache later. Feedback is powerful — use it throughout the course. Don't wait for them to fail at the end. This is, of course, particularly important in thesis writing, which may spread over a long period of time.
- Evaluation is powerful and is a high level skill — use it! Not just at the end, but maybe two or three times in your teaching program. Use the information you get from it. It's also good for students to learn the techniques of constructive criticism and to see them being applied.
- To further encourage critical skills in students, ask them to summarise and then critically review a few selected papers or other items. Do this early in their course or program, to enable you to rectify problems. This is particularly important for postgraduates.

Other things you can do:

Teaching techniques

- Offer extra support in the early part of the course for *all* students. Similarly, make sure early assignments are straightforward and involve less complex intellectual skills. Give students time to adjust to the subject content and to the teaching environment.
- Give students choice in their program/assessment.
- Encourage students to form study groups that meet before or after classes to discuss what's going on. This may be of particular use to students who have recently arrived in Australia.
- Check that students have understood instructions, especially safety instructions (for example, in a lab).
- Offer extra support to anyone who needs it before they give a class presentation. Go over their work and perhaps suggest they prepare a simple outline they can hand out to support their presentation.

Language

- Decide on the weight you will put on language in assessment. Don't focus only on language skills in assessing. Expert advice suggests it's best not to try to correct all the English errors; rather, try to correct a few, repeating errors that are crucial to the flow of the argument. Determine if the level of thinking is acceptable.
- Appreciate that time pressure (for example, in an exam) may unfairly affect students working in a second language.

Support and reflection

- Be aware of where to refer students if you think they have particular problems in study skills/life skills/language/adjustment to their program of study.
- It's good experience to be an overseas student yourself, or to reflect on the lack of acknowledgment of your own or your friends' cultural backgrounds in the Australian education system.

Recommended reading

Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. *Teaching students from overseas* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991.
Succinct and readable, this book is based on many years' experience. It justifies and expands on most of the suggestions given above, and it offers other detailed suggestions and self-test exercises.

Crosling, G. Straight or circular? Academic writing and the non-traditional student *HERDSA News, 15*(1):10-13, April 1993.
If you don't yet have a grasp of possible cultural differences in discourse and rhetoric, this brief article, with several examples, is illuminating.

Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S & Habeshaw, T. *53 interesting things to do in your lectures* 4th. ed. Bristol: Technical & Educational Services, 1992.
This book demystifies the craft of lecturing. Straightforward and to the point, it's a useful handbook to have on your bookshelves.

Habeshaw, S., Habeshaw, T. & Gibbs, G. *53 interesting things to do in your seminars and tutorials* 4th. ed. Bristol: Technical & Educational Services, 1992.
Another useful handbook, with sections on encouraging students to participate and take responsibility.

University resources

Chaplain to Overseas Students, Ground floor, Union House. Ph 344 4825.

English as a Second Language Program, Sixth floor, John Medley West Building. Ph 344 4491.

International Office, Ground floor, Raymond Priestley Building, East Wing. Ph 344 4505.

Learning Skills Unit, 784 Swanston St. Ph 344 4698 or 344 4957.

Melbourne University Overseas Student Service, Fourth floor, Union Building.

Kate Beattie
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
The University of Melbourne, Parkville
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Centre for the Study of Higher Education
University of Melbourne
Parkville,
Vic. 3052 Australia

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